

“Khaki”

By May Sinclair

THIS is the tale that Roland Simpson told about that queer girl he was engaged to, Frances Archdale.

I can't remember when she first met Miles Dickinson; but it must have been the same year that I did, somewhere in the late 'nineties. And it was at Chelsea when we were all living with profound economy in the dear old Vale, or near it.

He certainly was not an intimate friend of hers. I don't know that you could have called him a friend at all. You couldn't even say that she knew him very well. That's the queer part of it. Their acquaintance stopped short of friendship because—well, because of the absurdities we saw in him. We saw nothing else. You couldn't take him seriously without being absurd yourself. It's inconceivable the ass he was.

He got in among us because of his absurd respect for what he called our achievements; and he stayed because we simply couldn't have afforded to let him go. He amused us too much, and we (I like to think) may have sometimes amused *him*. I have by me now a sketch that Frances made of him. *That* was an achievement, if you like.

He was the sort of ass that's always going in for things, poring over text-books, struggling with the unborn and the unbearable. I can see him now, sitting at that table over there with his hands in his hair, beating his brains for rhymes to “lover” (it was we, I'm afraid, who fired him). He took quite meekly any that we gave him except “plover,” which he rejected, I remember, on the ground that it had been used before, and was far-fetched any way. He had lights sometimes that amazed us. Then he was always inventing things. At odd moments he had con-

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ceived (for us, if you please) a fountain pen which simply couldn't run dry (he called it the Perennial); also (for whom heaven knows!) a projectile to be used in time of war. It was, if I remember, to go up like a rocket and come down like a parachute, when it was estimated to destroy fifteen men, standing in close formation, and *then* to explode "laterally, my dear Simpson, laterally!" A terrific engine. When we told him that the Perennial was mightier than the Parachute, he would look at us and reply darkly, "Possibly. Possibly—in time of peace."

But don't run away with the idea that there was any sort of insanity about him. It was our fantastic handling of him that stimulated him to his most prodigious flights. In the bank that employed him he was as sane as a churchwarden, and competent—from nine in the morning till four in the afternoon, or later, an inimitably competent little banker's clerk. He had a splendid head for business and for figures—totted them up with his little darting forefinger at lightning speed.

We called him The Weazel because of the way he entrenched himself in his bank, and because of his bright-eyed alacrity in leaving it. Those of us who banked at the Metropolitan and Provincial used to visit him there and "draw" him, when we drew our slender cheques, a process he resented profoundly. We'd no business, he said, to come rotting him in business hours. How would we like it if he—and we retorted that we hadn't any business hours. Frances used to say that was what made it so mean of us, when the poor thing couldn't retaliate. But out of business hours there was nothing that he wouldn't stand from us, nothing that he wouldn't take, from rhymes to nicknames. We gave him lots. But far and away the best we found for him was "Khaki." When I say "We," I mean Frances. It was a nice name, and I think he liked it. It had, especially in her mouth, a diminutive, endearing sound. Whether he liked it or not, we adopted it with rapture, and it suited him better than any of his names, even the Perennial or the Parachute.

For he *was* khaki: his face, his little wisp of a moustache, his scrub of hair, with the front of it leaping up at you in a queer ungovernable tuft over his forehead; his very eyes were a sort of shade of khaki, and, I believe, if

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you'd stripped him, you'd have found him all khaki underneath.

That was when the Boer War broke out (a chance, we said, for "Khaki's" parachute). We never called him anything else, because of the way he went on about it. Not about the parachute (he'd abandoned that idea long ago), but about the war, the war. It had regularly got on his nerves, poor chap. He cut out all the maps the papers published and stuck them about his rooms with wafers. You'd find him there surrounded by maps, and with the last one spread out on the table before him, making imaginary plans of the campaign. You'd see him with his little forefinger crawling along the veld and pouncing now and then as if he'd really got the enemy that time, while he explained that if So and So had only done what you saw *him* doing just now there wouldn't have been that last "regrettable incident." He had a theory about every battle, and every skirmish; and every British disaster as it came along made him more cock-sure. And as the regrettable incidents multiplied he was presently explaining to us that if this, that, and the other had been done (which couldn't, of course, at the moment have *been* done), the whole thing would have been over in a month or two. The 'Tommies, he declared, knew more about it than the Generals.

The fun of the thing was that before the war broke out he was always talking about enlisting or volunteering, but when his opportunity stared him in the face, as you may say, we heard no more of it. He was one of those fellows who are always doing magnificent things in their heads, marvellous things on paper. And why on earth, when he could treat himself that way to all the sublime taste and vision of glory, why should he have done anything else? *We* saw to it that he rose to rapid promotion. From Mr. Thomas Atkins he became Sergeant, Lieutenant, Captain, Colonel Dickinson, D.S.O. But it was after Colenso that he flourished among us as Major-General Sir Miles Dickinson, K.C.B.

After Spion Kop he began to lie low a bit. By that time people *were* beginning to volunteer right and left of him. They had volunteered out of his own bank, and it wasn't very safe for him to talk about it. He used to look

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at us in those days in a kind of deprecating way, as if he thought we expected him to go.

Why, bless you, it was the last thing you did expect of “Khaki.” He wasn’t the kind that go. You’d only got to mention the evening paper to see how he funk’d it.

He had got a rise that year, and he wasn’t going to stir from the Metropolitan or from the villa at Brixton where he lived, heaven knows how. We hardly ever went to see him there. It was surprising how little, after all, we knew about him. We had to eke it out with extraordinary speculations as to his home-life—the Life, as we used to say, at Brixton. We wrote him and we drew him in every conceivable attitude and in every conceivable relation; we did it all, or what was printable of it, for Frances Archdale, to her infinite amusement.

It was comparatively late that we found out that the Life at Brixton was complicated, not to say hampered, by the existence of an invalid mother in a bedroom upstairs. He told us nothing, but we inferred complications from the falling off in the number and duration of his visits and from his increasing inability to come and dine.

Then the mother died, quite suddenly, and he appeared again among us. We’d got so into the habit of thinking him funny that when he told us that the old lady had passed away—“quite peacefully, Simpson, quite peacefully”—I’m not sure that we didn’t think it humorous of him in a subtle way. Frances, however, I’m bound to say, refused to go with us this time as far as that. It was going, she said, a bit too far.

But though she did occasionally urge decency upon us, Frances was worse than any of us. Within the limits of the printable, she went farther.

What? You think that showed——? Not a bit of it. She wasn’t in love with him—then. Oh, if you ask me how I know, I can only tell you I had the best reason in the world for knowing. We’d been engaged for the last six months. Underneath? No; not even underneath. She was the straightest woman I ever knew, and the sincerest. It wasn’t in her to hide or disguise a feeling. It wasn’t in her to make fun—like that—of anybody she cared about, or even moderately liked. And if you’d only seen him! You couldn’t have been afraid of Khaki as a possible rival.

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You couldn't have considered him as in the running, at all.

And don't imagine for a moment that he cared for *her*. That would have made him absurder than he was. It spoils it—what's coming (*she* said so)—if you think of either of them as caring—then.

I don't think he knew the feeling. Women didn't seem to appeal to him in any way. There were some of us who doubted if he had ever—— But we needn't go into that. I only mentioned it for the rumness of it.

After Ladysmith another young clerk from the Metropolitan volunteered for South Africa. It was Khaki who told us of his going. He put it to us, was there anything else the boy could do? To be sure, he had a mother living, but he wasn't the only son. There were, he said, two others. That ought to have given us the clue, but it didn't. When he had left us Frances asked me, Did I think for a moment he'd go too? I said, "Not he. He's gone already, twenty times, in fancy. The Weasel must by this time be fed up with South Africa."

"What do you think will become of him?" she said then. "What do you think he'll really do?"

We were always planning fantastic careers, outrageous histories for him. This time I was tired of him and serious, so I said, "He won't do anything. He'll just go on weaseling."

We'd made a verb out of him, "to weasel." It meant to be fatuous, to be ineffectual, to be, in a sudden, darting, almost furtive fashion, preposterous and absurd. Khaki would go on behaving according to his nature, go on forever being the mild ass he was.

A fortnight after, I met Frances on the Embankment and she turned and walked to the Vale with me.

"Have you seen Khaki?" she asked me.

I hadn't.

I didn't know, then, he was going out, after all?

We looked at each other and smiled indecorously. It didn't seem credible. But it was true. He had enlisted in the Imperial Yeomanry. The bank, she said, had given him his outfit and his horse. Did I think he'd be able to stick on it?

I didn't.

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He was to sail, I learnt, in less than a week.

I and another fellow went down to Southampton to see Khaki off.

We chaffed him up to the last minute, to his immense delight. We simply had to, because if we hadn't we couldn't have borne it. Besides, it was the first time we'd seen him *in* it; and flesh and blood couldn't resist him. He was all one colour now; his face was only a paler and his eyes a brighter shade of it. The cock of his hat didn't suit him, and it let that tuft of hair escape. His uniform, made in a hurry, fitted vilely; the jacket was too loose and long, and the breeches much too baggy before they went in too tight. And his putties—they looked as if they'd been wound round his legs by a ladies' ambulance class. He said he hadn't got the hang of them yet, and there weren't any calves to keep them up. He was horribly pale going on board; he suggested ashes and green clay—the foreshadowing of awful things. The man who was with me declared afterwards that Khaki must have been made drunk and been put up to go, and that in his heart, poor chap, he funked it. What was the use, he said, of sending fellows like that out? What they wanted was men.

I didn't think anything of Khaki's colour, because I happened to know that he was a bad sailor, so abominably bad that it was doubtful if there would be much left of Khaki when they landed him. Why, the very sight of the ship was more than he could stand. When they were casting off and he was trying to wave to us from her side, she gave a heave, and the last we saw of Khaki doesn't bear thinking about.

In fact, he didn't bear thinking about at all. And by degrees, because he was so painful to us, we left off thinking about him.

But at first we thought a lot. We kept on saying to each other that he'd be all right because of his protective colouring. *In* khaki, with his tuft of hair sticking out, he would be indistinguishable from any bit of veld with scrub on it. All but his eyes, which would continue to dart and shine in the sun, and would make him a mark—we reflected dolefully, till Frances hit on the idea that Khaki's eyes would simply be taken for little lizards, little darting lizards in the grass.

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We speculated freely as to why he went. It was just possible, after all, we thought, that some girl had chucked him. But it wasn't likely. As Frances said, he couldn't *be* chucked, if nobody had ever taken him up. Nobody ever had, as far as we knew. And he wasn't the sentimental sort, the sort that cherishes a grudge against things in general because the women don't seem to care about him. Of course, they may have cared; there may have been rows of them who'd have given their eyes for him, absurd as he was, for anything I know. My point is that he wasn't giving *his* eyes, that he wasn't absurd in that way; and that if any woman was at the bottom of it, it wasn't Frances. I tell you, the queer part of it was that she hardly knew him.

In moments of remorse we fancied that it was we, by continually chaffing him, who had made him go.

But it wasn't we. I see now what it was. I think I should have seen it even if Frances—I mean her extraordinary behaviour afterwards—hadn't made me see.

It was she who heard before any of us, who found the account of him, I should say; the small picturesque bit in a special correspondent's paragraph. It was long after Ladysmith and Mafeking, when news began to leak through into the papers. Not that this leaked. It rushed, it leaped at us; at Frances first, then me.

I had found her in her room with the paper in her hands. She gave it me without a word. I remember noticing that she didn't seem what you would call shocked, nor yet upset or excited. Her teeth were locked tight, but her eyes glowed at me. There was a sort of exaltation about her.

We stood looking at each other, just knowing then, a little more vividly, a little more poignantly than anybody else—because, you see, *we* had known him—what everybody knows now, how Corporal Miles Dickinson, of the 99th Battalion of Imperial Yeomanry, had volunteered to carry despatches somewhere or other: because he knew the way. In fact, he knew two ways: the shorter and less obvious leading close beside the Boer camp. Of course, the details didn't get through then; we heard afterwards how he found his way, the shorter way (he, Khaki, found it), how he delivered his despatches and returned, with other despatches, by the other way, the safe and obvious

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one; under orders, damned, no doubt, for a fool, and with two other men to look after him and see that he didn't make a fool of himself a second time. And how on the safe way, among the scrub, three Boers began potting them at close range; how the other men who were looking after Khaki rode off—without the despatches; and how little Khaki dismounted—damning *them*, you bet, for worse than fools—put a match to his dangerous papers and destroyed them; and then, at his ripe leisure, fired, and was fired at; and fell, shot through the eyes.

When she saw my face as I came to it she broke down.

Our communion in the next few weeks, as soon as we could bear to talk about him, had Miles Dickinson for its sole and sacred object. Miles Dickinson—the terrible thing was that we didn't, that we couldn't, call him Khaki any more. That showed, I said, how irrevocably we had lost him. But Frances maintained—I remember now, with some slight flaming—that it didn't show anything of the sort; it showed how we had found him; how greatly, how immeasurably we had gained.

We made it out between us, she and I, bit by bit, till we knew—we were certain—what he had gone out for. She, I ought to say, made out considerably more than I did. And she rejected more. She wouldn't allow, she seemed to have some invincible and mysterious repugnance to allowing, that there might have been a woman in it.

"You won't admit," I said (I was a little amused at the tone she took about it), "you won't admit, then, that he could have been in love?"

I shall never forget the look, the light, with which she answered me.

"He was in love, *all the time*," she said. "He was in love with honour. He was in love with danger."

"All the time? Then why didn't he go out at once, in the beginning, when the others went?"

"Don't you see? He couldn't. It was different for him. He couldn't leave his old mother. He had, you know, to keep her." She made it out amazingly. "He'd have gone into the army when he was a boy, if his people could have afforded to send him. But they couldn't. They were horribly poor. And afterwards there were other things—debts, I suppose—and the expenses of her illness."

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(I wondered how on earth she had made out all that. And I was to wonder more and more, as she went on more brilliantly.)

Then—didn't I see it?—when he'd wound up his poor little affairs, he went. He darted out, bright-eyed, to the splendour he saw shining; he rushed into the arms of the thing he was in love with.

I asked her once (being a little disturbed by her enthusiasm), "Frances, would you have been glad if he had been in love with *you*?"

I remember her look of still amazement and her still reply. "Oh no, Roly; that would have spoilt it all."

Her light, as I found out afterwards, was not all intuitive. She had gone, as on a pilgrimage, to the house at Brixton, and got most of it out of his servant. He had left the house to the old woman, as a provision for her in case of his death. She was, Frances said, letting rooms in it—all the rooms except his. Frances must have made love to Khaki's servant, for one day—she was always going there—she came back with an old photo of Khaki in a leather frame and a bundle of those plans of the campaign that he was always making. She showed them to some General she had contrived to meet, and he told her that Khaki's plans were all right; wonderfully right, considering.

But that (I'm forgetting) was long afterwards. The General's opinion of Khaki had nothing to do with Frances's state of mind, her extraordinary behaviour. It was as if, having made Khaki out better than anybody, she was independent of other people's judgments. She was, as I said, exalted.

But the thing was getting on her nerves, I could see that. I supposed that at first she had, after all, been stunned by the horror of it—happening to a man we knew—and that she was only beginning to realise it now.

But it wasn't that a bit. It was that she had begun to go back, to remember, to think of him as Khaki.

I tried to stop her talking about him, but I couldn't. Sometimes she'd sit brooding without saying a word, and sometimes nothing but talking would appease her. Once, after a silence which I must say I found oppressive, she would burst out unexpectedly with something like this:

"Do you remember how bright his eyes were?"

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I did.

And after a bit she'd begin again. “Roland, I'd give anything if Khaki could come back to us; if we could show him——”

I had an awful time with her. It was in the spring that the thing had happened. Just before it happened we had settled that we were to be married some time in the autumn. In the summer she began to get ill. She hadn't the energy to go about and do things, and I was horribly uneasy. She was regularly wearing herself out with it, torturing herself and me with her remorse, with her memory, the daily poignant memory of the way, as she said, we had treated him, the things we had said and thought of him. It was worse for her than for us; she had gone farther—her fancy had been more cruelly, more fiendishly fertile. (She had burnt all the sketches and caricatures she had made of him—masterpieces! All except one or two which she had done in some sudden fit of gravity. *They* were not quite so good.)

I was very gentle with her. I conceded everything but that. We had been beasts, I said; and she, always, like an angel, had stood up for him.

At that she gave a little cry of anguish. “If I had only known, Roly. If I had only known——”

That was her burden now—“If we had only known!”

“What good would it have done him?” I said once. “Our knowing?”

“None,” she agreed. “When you think of the difference between him and *us*.”

She began to make us feel it. There wasn't one of us that was fit to speak to him, to look at him, to black his boots.

How could we have expected to see what was in him? She took the high tone with us that there was he, and here we were—a set of clever little persons living by our wits; “far” (she put it a bit hysterically, I thought), “far from life and death.” What could we know? How could we have seen it?

But she—she had always seen it. She had actually made herself believe *that*, made herself believe that she had seen all the time what was in Khaki. I've told you that she hardly knew him. She seemed to be making out

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now that she had known him considerably better than she had.

I told her once, when she was going on about him, that she hadn't really known him, and that she certainly hadn't by any means always seen. On the contrary, she *had* been worse than any of us—the very worst.

I was rather brutal about it, for I felt that the obsession was bad for her, and I wanted to bring her sane sense of humour into play. I didn't realise in the least *then* (God forgive me!) how she was taking it, or I couldn't have said what I finally did say, that her feeling was exaggerated, and that she couldn't go on more than she was doing if she were in love with him.

The look she turned on me then was of surprise and grief, almost of supplication, as if she implored me to spare her. I gathered afterwards that what she wanted to be spared was not the knowledge of herself, of what was in her, but the knowledge of what was in me, the depths of stupidity that I could sink to.

My stupidity was, as it happened, abysmal. I thought she was merely cherishing, a little too sentimentally, his memory. I thought I could measure myself advantageously against that. How could I tell what she was capable of? How could I tell what he was to her? How could I measure the immortality he had in her?

After that she drew into herself and left off talking about him. Mind you, she didn't talk to everybody, to the others. She told me once she could only talk to *me* because—well, because I cared for her. And, oddly enough, after I'd stopped her talking she began to get happier; and I thought it was all right—for me, I mean—until I found out that she was thinking about him half the time. How did I know it? I knew it by the look she had, as if she caught, from some height that faced the sun, shining, flashing signals of little Khaki's soul. She gave me to understand that it was all right—all right for her.

Then suddenly, without a word of warning, without my being in the least prepared for it, she chucked me.

I asked her, among other things, if she did it because she was in love with anyone else. Her answer was that she was not in love at all. Then she corrected herself. "Not, at least, with anything you could understand."

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I *didn't* understand it at the time, and I don't think I altogether understand it now. I don't mind confessing that I pressed her hard, several times, to reconsider her decision, but she remained firm. She was very sorry, she said, but she couldn't marry me; she couldn't marry anybody.

And in the end, under provocation, more came out. She couldn't bear, she said, to live with the memories we should have between us—she and I.

That settled me. I don't think I could have borne what she would have made *me* live with.

I haven't seen her since she left Chelsea and went to live in that house of his, in the rooms his servant wouldn't let. I suppose she had proved her right to them. The place was a shrine for her of the thing she worshipped.

No. I tell you it was not his memory that she worshipped, that she was in love with. It wasn't anything as cheap as that. You want to know what it *was*? How do I know? The whole trouble was that I didn't.

Well, yes, I suppose it was a sort of immortality—it was Khaki's little soul. She saw it flashing to her—heliographing.

She hasn't married. I don't suppose she ever will. Nobody, I imagine, would be good enough for her—after him.